Actions on Contact
At the Company Team Level

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Actions on contact should be at the very heart of tactical training in combat infantry units. These are some of the most critical actions our soldiers will execute in future conflicts, and soldiers will do in combat exactly what they have learned in training.

When leaders at company and platoon level are asked which items they think are most important to rehearse and understand before a mission, the most likely answer is "actions on the objective and actions on contact." During both defensive and movement to contact operations, actions on contact actually represent the initiation of "actions on the objective." When conducting a deliberate attack, intelligence will deter-

mine whether a unit will have a true objective and conduct a real deliberate attack or treat the mission as a movement to contact.

Observations at the National Training Center (NTC) have revealed deficiencies in platoon and company level action-on-contact drills for both light and mechanized infantry units. My experience as a company team combat trainer at the NTC shows that most unit leaders are unaware of the various forms of contact they may encounter there: direct fire, indirect fire, air attack, obstacles, observation, electronic warfare, and nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons effects. These forms of contact are generic enough that they can be used by maneuver units ranging in type and capability from light infantry to heavy armor and can form the basis of what many call platoon battle drills.

Simply by using doctrine-based and tactically sound procedures, a unit can easily apply the forms of contact as a foundation for building a series of platoon and company battle drills. A company playbook might contain seven sections, each detailing reactions or options to a form of contact. A sample index for such a playbook is shown in the accompanying box. Sketches for the way a unit might diagram a given reaction to contact can be drawn from several doctrinal manuals, but one of the most helpful for mechanized forces is ARTEP 17-237-10 MTP, *Mission Training Plan for the Tank Platoon.*

Once a battlebook or playbook is established, a commander can provide subordinates with focus for training exercises. For example, he can specify that platoons practice reactions to direct fire with emphasis on support-by-fire and dismounted assault during a specific field training exercise. When involved in sustained operations, he can provide mission focus by directing platoon-level rehearsals on a specific set of battle drills that may support his company mission.

It is only through training that a unit can effectively prepare to conduct actions on contact. This must be a drill that has been practiced many times. Like the play calls of a football team, actions on contact are a matter of instinctive execution. A unit may know what to do on contact but will need practice to execute it flawlessly.

ACTIONS ON CONTACT

DIRECT FIRE
- Support by Fire
- -Mounted
- -Dismounted
- Attack by Fire
- Assault
- - Mounted
- - Dismounted
- Defend
- Break Contact
- Raid
- Ambush
- Develop Contact

OBSTACLES
- Identify
- Classify
- Seek Bypass
- Breach—Manual
- Breach—MICLIC
- Breach—Tank Plow
- Proof Lanes
- Assault Breach

OBSERVATION
- Employ Smoke
- Report
- Use Terrain
- Identify Intervisibility Lines
- React to Enemy Smoke
- Emplace OPs
- Cross Intervisibility Lines
- - Mounted
- - Dismounted

INDIRECT FIRE
- Survivability Move (Box, etc.)
- Button Up
- Remount Infantry
- Activate CFZs

AIR
- Passive Stationary
- Active—Rotary
- Active—Fixed Wing
- Survivability Move (Same as Artillery)

NUCLEAR, BIOLOGICAL, CHEMICAL
- Mask
- Button Up
- Overpressure (Tanks)
- Hasty Decontamination
- Identify Chemical Agents
- React to Nuclear Threat

ELECTRONIC WARFARE
- Send MIJI Report
- Observe Operational Security
- Use Secure Communications
- Use Visual Signals
- Employ a Runner
- Hot Loop/Lay Wire

The development of battle drills or a playbook is never easy for company leaders, but a good place to start is with an understanding of the purpose of reactions to each type of contact. An infantry company's bread and butter is its ability to react under direct fire. The purpose of this series of battle drills is ultimately to set the conditions for the assault or, in the defense, to complete the destruction of the enemy.

Let's analyze an offensive reaction to direct-fire contact. Assuming we do not have perfect knowledge of the enemy disposition, we must make certain assumptions in our company-level intelligence preparation of the battlefield process—such as: Where am I most likely to make contact under each of the forms of contact? Where is the decisive point? And How must I array my forces so I can achieve the desired effect of massing my combat power at that point? These are not easy questions to answer, but they do serve as a starting point. As in most cases in the offense, the enemy will probably see and engage us first.

As well-trained, aggressive soldiers, our first instinct is to attack. Without an assessment of the situation, however, attacking can be just mass suicide. Charging into the enemy's engagement area or "kill sack" is a common phenomenon at the NTC. What is most often used is a corruption of the "action drill" as outlined in the tank platoon manual. A Bradley team will "action" or turn toward the enemy attempting to close the gap and, in the process of trying to cover some two kilometers, its entire number is destroyed. Analysis shows that no fire and maneuver or development of the situation was used. A critical flaw here is in thinking that a Bradley has as much protection as a tank. This will never be the case. Success demands a shrewder approach.

The ultimate goal of this type of situation is to place overwhelming suppressive firepower on the enemy forces as quickly as possible, but company leaders must first assess the situation. The key here is to identify the enemy, determine his strength, and decide where to suppress and assault. To do this, elements of the company may have to back up and seek cover while maintaining suppressive fire with others. During this process, all available forces

must be firing either on the enemy or in his general direction.

Although this is a time-sensitive process during which momentum may be lost, good planning and well-drilled actions will save valuable time. For mechanized forces, this may consist of dismounting infantrymen to assist in the identification process. For light forces, it may consist of probing patrols to identify the enemy's positions and a weak point in his defense.

Once the enemy has been identified and his strength roughly assessed, the commander determines where the point of penetration is and whether he will be able to assault. He will also establish his criteria for the assault. During both World Wars, German commanders selected a point of main effort (*Schwerpunkt*) where the bulk of their forces were deployed to force a decision. (A German maxim is that "a commander without a *Schwerpunkt* is like a man without character.") Once the decisive point has been determined, the commander must orchestrate the suppressive fire effort involving the bulk of the company.

Artillery and mortars are frequently overlooked. A company commander can rapidly multiply his volume of suppressive fire by placing massed mortar or artillery fires on or near expected enemy positions. When coordinated effectively, indirect fire support can buy leaders the time they need to make situational assessments and maneuver direct fire forces into a positional advantage.

Suppressive fire should be detailed to provide most of the volume of fire on the point at which we hope to penetrate. Other enemy elements away from the point of penetration should be fixed by indirect or direct fire as necessary. Sheer volume of fire at the point of penetration will give us the edge we need to conduct the assault, because the volume of suppressive fire is often more important than its accuracy. Although near misses have no effect on the MILES battlefield, in actual combat they have both physically and psychologically destructive effects on the enemy. When planning the support-by-fire, commanders must ensure that each platoon knows how long it will be expected to suppress and with which weapons. To use a light infantry example, the sustained rate of fire for the M60 machinegun is 100 rounds per minute. If a commander places only two guns in the support-by-fire position, gives them basic loads, and allows them to fire simultaneously at the sustained rates, he will have only nine minutes. This will also lead a commander to determine logistical requirements for given missions, and this detailed planning is vital to success.

Once he achieves suppression of the enemy forces in contact, the commander will commit a maneuver force to complete their destruction. But a clear criterion for commitment of the assault must be spelled out during planning. For example, a commander may require the suppression or destruction of all vehicle-mounted weapon systems on the objective. Implied here is the ability to identify targets and to gain positional advantage in order to place suppressive fires upon those enemy forces. If this criterion is not established or not met, the assault will be little more than a gamble and is probably doomed to failure as enemy forces not identified and targeted can bring fire to bear on the unsuspecting assault force in the engagement area. A small assault force can easily destroy the enemy at the point of penetration if it has closely coordinated fires from the support-by-fire element.

Actions on contact are inextricably tied to actions at a support-by-fire position, where most battles are won or lost. If you can achieve overwhelming fire superiority in a deliberate manner, victory is certain. As Field Marshal Erwin Rommel said, "I have found again and again that in encounter actions, the day goes to the side that is the first to plaster its opponent with fire." Observations at the NTC show this to be true. It is misguided aggressiveness that steers the Blue Forces wrong. Units that aggressively engage enemy forces on contact before maneuvering toward them usually succeed as suppressive fire allows commanders freedom of maneuver.

Observations also show that reactions to indirect fires, aircraft fires, obstacles, and NBC are all better trained than units' reactions to direct fire. This may be because these are described in more detail in such doctrinal manuals as FMs 17-15, *Tank Platoon*; 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*; and 7-7J, *The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad (Bradley)*. Although each of these forms of contact has a prescribed battle drill, commanders should develop more than one option, because any battle drill should be integrated with a reaction to enemy direct fire. For example, when the enemy uses indirect fire, it is usually coupled with direct fire or an expected reaction to any given form of contact.

Two additional forms of contact that occur routinely at the NTC are electronic warfare and observation. When fighting a sophisticated enemy, reaction to various types of electronic warfare measures requires quick and decisive reaction for continued command and control. Regardless of enemy sophistication, we will usually be under enemy observation, and this type of contact is always the first, which leads to other, more lethal forms. Variations of this form of contact may include such reactions as the use of screening or obscuring smoke.

With forethought, doctrinal study, and adherence to tactical principles, company commanders of both light and mechanized infantry units can develop a blueprint for future combat success. With firepower, aggressiveness, and training on our side, we will have the ingredients for victory. And when properly applied, our actions on contact will set the stage for the first victory of our next combat action.

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